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ABSTRACT

This paper asserts that while predicting in listening is a very important listening skill and listening habit, English language learners are often reluctant to use prediction. It recommends that teachers should work to cultivate students' predicting ability so that the students can form a natural and effective listening habit and can predict based on the topic, topic sentence, key words, sentence development, grammatical relations, and logical development. The paper focuses on the following: how people listen in their native language; how English learners listen in English; the cognitive process of predicting; predicting as a pre-listening activity; helping students to predict (prediction in the before-listening stage and prediction while listening); and sentence-by-sentence prediction (e.g., sentence-by-sentence is the natural predicting process in listening, the stock formula of the language helps listeners to predict, and the stress on a particular word in the first part of an utterance is often explained or clarified by a comment in the second). The paper concludes that teachers must remind their students that prediction and guessing is a good thing in foreign language listening and must encourage them to do so. (SM)

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Training the University English Learners to Predict in Listening Class

Ji Lingzhu

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How Do People Listen in Their Native Language?

When you listen to a person speaking in your own language, do you listen word by word or sound by sound? In many situations, you find yourself one step ahead of the speaker. You can very often predict what the person is going to say next---perhaps not always the exact words, but at least the main ideas. We often find ourselves finishing other people's sentences for them. This is often something we do without even thinking about it. The more you can predict, the easier it becomes to understand.

How do English learners listen in English?

The beginning English learners rely very much on the bottom-up processing when they listen, and listen word by word or even sound by sound. Many of them stop the tape after each sentence and repeat several times. The intermediate learners can concentrate on the first few sentences, and translate them into their native language. While they are

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doing the mental translating, the speaker has got far ahead. I often find learners listen very attentively at very beginning, and then fall asleep later. The learners report that they have no time to react at all. When they listen to the long sentences, they cannot get them complete, they can only remember the first or the second half of the sentence. They are at a loss when asked to transfer the information from the listening passage to the exercises. Therefore they complain strongly listening comprehension is so difficult that they are very nervous in listening examination, and even in the listening class. In daily communication, if they haven't got a speaker's words, they can ask the speaker to repeat. But in lecture listening and listening class, the lecturer does not stop for a certain person who does not understand. That is why the intermediate level learners complain strongly. The beginners listen to daily life dialogues, narrative and recounting passages, which are easier. When they come to the more demanding genres like news, exposition and argumentation passages, they feel in clouds.

The learners' listening ability is strongly influenced by their general English language proficiency. However, the development of listening ability is much slower than that of reading.

In their mother tongue, their cognitive ability is fully developed. They have their own understanding of the world, and have accumulated much background knowledge. However, their top-down processing

ability in listening is not very well developed. They are reluctant to predict and neither do they know how to predict. Some of the students tried to predict, but they come to the wrong direction.

Cognitive Process of Predicting

All predictions are based on certain rules including logic, syntax, phonetics, etc., which are used by the listener to process the meaning contained in the actual words and sentences. In many cases, the listener will surpass the surface meaning in search of the more profound meaning. To process the coming information, the listeners will use their own knowledge of the world: knowledge about a particular thing or a certain experience and the common procedural knowledge. The listeners' comprehension is decided by the social knowledge he has already acquired and what he thinks about the society. This is the so called cognitive environment for comprehension. The listeners are from the different social and educational backgrounds, who have their own understanding of the world, and different cognitive abilities. They use their own cognitive models to process the new-coming language input and predict what will happen next.

The process of prediction includes the narrowing down of the listeners' general experience by the input language information, and the

enlarging of the language input by the listener. When he/she hears the first sentence of a discourse, he/she begins to form his predictions based on his/her previous experience: what the topic is? What kind of suggestions will the speaker make? What is the intention of the speaker? His interpretation and understanding of the discourse will be based on all these predictions. The prediction begins with the first sentence he/she hears, therefore the scope for the general topic is limited, that is the listener makes his decision in a range within which he could interpret the whole discourse. In the course of listening, the previous sentence will limit his prediction about the next one. Of course this kind of prediction may be wrong sometimes, the listeners' interpretation may be different, but the information from the next sentence will help him to modify his prediction, based on which he will make further ones. The listener actually tries their best to make a varieties of predictions from every incoming sentence, which in turn provides him with more new information. The limited input language information will be processed by the cognitive model in the listeners' mind, therefore a lot of associations will be produced. So the load of the input language information is actually increased in the course of processing. Predicting ability is a basic skill in the course of communication, but the most important one in the listening comprehension.

According to Goh (1998), prediction is a kind of top-down listening strategy, it enables the listeners to anticipate the next part of a text, such as a word, a phrase or an idea. One tactic is to predict the contents from the title or topic before listening. The other is to anticipate details in the next part while listening. I notice that my beginner students do not have the awareness to predict. They rely too much on their linguistic knowledge, and want to discriminate every sound when they listen, otherwise they worry they might have missed something; the intermediate students guess what the speaker is going to say or what the next part of a listening text is going to be in their listening, but they often come to the wrong direction, neither can they notice or use the very obvious logical or linguistic clues for prediction.

Therefore we should try to enhance the students' consciousness of prediction in order to form a natural and effective listening habit. To achieve this goal, it is necessary for the students to go through a certain period of training.

Predicting is a good pre-listening activity

In our daily time listening, people usually have some ideas of what they expect to listen. If you go to the restaurant, you know what the waitress is going to say. So in the foreign Language listening classroom,

before we let the students listen to some materials in the target language, we should give them some orientations, let them know what they are going to do. It is rather unfair to put the students directly into listening, as it makes it extremely difficult for the students to use the natural listening skills of matching what they hear with what they expect to hear, and using their previous knowledge to make sense of it. So before listening students should be tuned in so that they know what to expect. Helping the students predict is a good pre-listening activity, which can build up their expectations for the coming input.

Helping students to predict

As Goh (1998) mentioned: prediction is used in both pre-listening stage and while-listening stage, the training can be divided into two stages:

I. Before-listening stage:

Prediction based on the topic.

In our foreign language listening classes in China, fixed textbooks or handouts are used. Before they listen, listeners usually know the topic and the key words are usually given. There are more content words in the topics. This is a good resource for prediction cultivating. Here is an example. The topic is: An Alarming Experience on the Road . Ask the students to read the topic carefully, and direct their attention to

the following three words: alarming, experience and road. After reading them carefully, ask the students to discuss the following questions: 1. what is the coming passage about? 2. Is it a narrative passage or a recounting passage?

Most of the students are able to get the answers to the questions . This is a recounting passage, and the speaker will tell a traffic accident he/she has seen or has been involved in. Remember to remind the students how a recounting passage is organized. It will be given in temporal order, and there will be quite a lot of details and descriptions. All the participants and their actions will be mentioned. When the students have predicted the traffic accident, tell them to think about the cause, the damage to the implements and casualties.

From the above mentioned analysis, we can see that just from this topic, the students' schema for traffic accidents and recounting passage can be activated. Discussion and prediction before listening build up the learners' expectations for the coming passage.

For instance, the students are going to listen to three dialogues. The general topic for them is I Don't See It That Way. Before I played the tape to the students, I asked them to discuss this topic. From the discussion, they knew the two speakers in the dialogues did not agree with each other. They argued with each other. They may be angry with each other, and they may talk at the same time.

Prediction based on the key words:

From the topic, we can predict the key words, and also vice versa. The listening text books we use often list some key words before the information transfer exercises. If the teacher just gives the meanings of the new words to the students, it is undoubtedly a waste of this resource. The word list for a dialogue between a police officer and a thief is this: mask, robbery, recognize, fingerprint, jewels, mattress, burglary, fortune etc. Of course the purpose of the text editor is to show the learners the new words for the dialogue and familiarize them with the new words before listening. But as a teacher, we should find good ways to make use of the words. After the learners go over all the words, ask them some questions:

1. What is the passage you are going to hear mainly about?
2. What did the thief wear?
3. What did the thief steal?
4. Where did the police find them?

They can find brief answers to all the questions based on the key words. After that ask them to think about the passage. Until now the students have already mentally constructed a dialogue between the policeman and the thief. The only thing left is to listen to the tape and

confirm their predictions or revise them.

Prediction based on the exercises designed for the while listening and post listening period

In the listening textbooks, there are always different kinds of exercises designed for the learners to do after they listen to the passage to check whether they have got the intended information or not. We can use them for pre-listening prediction.

The following are T or F questions for a listening passage:

1. The students normally have only one chance to understand the lecturer.
2. Students should not be discouraged by the new words in lectures, because they can always look them up in the dictionary later.
3. Students should always write down the title correctly and completely, for it will help the students catch the main points of the lecture.
4. You can always be sure that a lecturer will always indicate if an important point is to follow.
5. Students should also pay attention to the indirect signals a lecturer uses to indicate an important point.

6. The students need to make a note of every point that the lecturer makes.

7. The students should write his notes when the lecturer is giving important information.

8. Spacing and underlining help to show the structure of the lecture.

Before they listened, the students were asked to read the eight statements very carefully, and find out the general topic, the supporting ideas and the key words.

Ninety percent of the students reported they got the topic: what the students should do when they attend a lecture? Seventy percent of the students got the supporting points: 1. How to solve the new words problem? 2. What should be done to the title? 3. How to get the main idea? 4. What should be written down? 5. When to take notes? 6. How should the notes be organized on the paper? Nearly all of them got the key words: lecture , new words, title, important points, signal, notes, spacing and underlining etc.

The smart students also knew where they should direct their attention to answer the questions. For No.1, they should pay attention to "only one chance". No.2, "should not" and "because...". No.3, " for...". .No.4, "always...always...". No 6, "every point" No7, "should". No. 8, "help."

Prediction based on the speakers and their relations:

Usually, if we know who the speakers are, and their relationship, we will be able to predict what they will talk about. And if we know what they are talking about, we will be able to predict the relationship between them. Lexical signals are most helpful. Learners need to listen for two or three recognizable lexical items, then they will be able to link this to their prior knowledge of the topic.

1. Robert is meeting his professor for the first time.

From this we will know that they will say Hello to each other, and an introduction will be followed, and this dialogue will be very formal, because Robert is only a student, and the professor's social position is high above him.

2. This is a dialogue between speaker A and B.

A: That radio is terribly loud.

B: Sorry. Is that disturbing you?

A: I am trying to write an essay.

B: I am sorry. I did not know.

A and B are roommates because A can hear the noise of B's radio.

The pre-listening prediction helps to focus the students' minds on the topic by narrowing down the things the students expect to hear and activating the relevant prior knowledge and already known language. Foe those without sufficient prior knowledge of the topic, such activities provide an opportunity to gain some knowledge which will help them to follow the listening text. In addition , it is likely that in this kind pre-listening predicting, students will actually use the words they are going to hear in the text. Their known lexis and syntax will assist them when they come to match what they hear with their store of knowledge.

II. Prediction in while listening stage

Prediction based on topic sentence (or first sentence)

In the intermediate level textbooks, the learners are required to listen to some short paragraphs to train their academic listening ability. The articles are usually in formal speech. The first sentence of the paragraph is usually the topic for sentence, which usually contains the main idea, not only the subject matter, but also the speaker's opinion sometimes. So in actual teaching, I often stop the machine after the first sentence, and ask the learners to discuss the sentence and to predict the next one.

Of course, the evolution from a total barter society to one that was totally monetized did not occur overnight.

This is the first sentence of a paragraph about world trade. From the sentence we know that it is not the first paragraph of the article, but a paragraph in the middle. The speaker must have mentioned the change from barter to money payment in the previous paragraph, and he is going to talk about how gradual the change was, and perhaps will also give us the changing stages and the major causes as well.

Sentence by sentence prediction

A. ***This is the natural predicting process in listening.***

The linear nature of the language enables listeners to listen to the first sentence, and predict the second, and modify their prediction sentence by sentence. Listeners use the gradually increased information load to predict. Logic thinking will play a very important role here. Prediction and modification take their turns to function in the comprehension process.

For example, the first sentence of a piece of news is this: Los Angeles police yesterday added a new name to the list of victims of what they believe is a new serial killer. From this sentence, we know that there have already been some victims earlier. The killer is a serial killer,

then we want to know what kind of people were the killer's victims. The next sentence is: Like the first four victims Joseph griffin is a homeless man shot on the head while sleeping alone outdoors at night. The second sentence told us that the homeless men sleeping outside alone are the killer's victims. Our prediction after we hear the first sentence is confirmed by the second sentence.

B. The stock formula of the language also helps the listeners to predict

The clichés, idioms, quotations, and proverbs which are know so widely that having heard the first half, we can easily predict the second.

"East, west…(home is the best)

"Early to bed, early to rise…(makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise)

"The proof of the pudding…(is in the eating)

C. The stress on a particular word in the first part of an utterance is often explained or clarified by a comment in the second

She wore a RED dress…(she did not wear a blue one)

I didn't see PETER…(I saw Tom)

D. In some language constructions, the speaker proclaims in advance the kind of thing he is going to say:

The question is…(a question)

There are two ways of doing that…(two suggestions)

E. Rhetorical questions or bald, brief statements, particularly in the negative, are often followed by answers, or amplification in the form of reasons, examples or explanations:

Everything has changed…(examples)

I don't agree…(reasons)

F. Prediction based on the grammar structures:

Although the sentence patterns we use when we speak are varied, the following four have high frequency in speech: comparatives, conditionals, narrative sequence, cause and effect etc.

1. For the comparative, the structure is usually like this: A be/V… than B. Direct the students' attention to the first half of the sentence, and let them guess the second half.
2. In the conditionals, there are usually many semantic markers: if, even if, unless, only if, in case, whether or not, in the event etc. the main clause will be the results based on the conditions.
   a. If you had studied hard earlier, you would…
   b. Although he liked the book very much, …

For sentence a, the second half may be "you would have passed the examination." For sentence b, the second half may be " he didn't borrow it (buy it) ".

3. In a recounting passage, the events are arranged according to the chronological order, there are usually some time or sequential markers: before, after, as soon as, etc.

Before she went to university, she had stayed in the country for about five years.

This sentence presupposes that, she stayed in the countryside and she went to university later. And perhaps in the following, the speaker will talk about her life in the country and its influence on her.

4. For cause and effect sentence, students can use their prior knowledge to predict cause or the effect. These kind of sentence do not always have markers like because, so, therefore, or as. They may use passive voice or time adverbial clause etc.

For example:

a. The sharply increased output was produced by the use of the new method.

Because of the use of the new method, the output sharply increased.

b. All the birds in the tree flew away when he fired.

Because he fired, all the birds in the tree flew away.

G. Predictions based on the semantic markers:

They serve as signals for the meaning of the lecture and the text. They tell us how the ideas are organized. There are many semantic markers in English, which are classified here according to their functions.

1. The markers used for listing: firstly, thirdly, finally etc.
2. Marker that show us the cause and effect relationship: so, since, because, therefore etc.
3. Markers which indicate that the speaker is going to illustrate his ideas by giving examples: for instance, for example etc.
4. Markers that introduce an idea which runs against what has been said, or is going to be said: but, yet , although etc.
5. Markers that indicate the speaker is going to sum up his ideas: to summarize, in other words, what I have been saying is this etc.
6. Markers that are used to express a time relationship: when, before, as soon as, after etc.
7. Markers that are used to indicate the relative importance of something: I would like direct your attention to, etc.
8. Markers that are used to re-phrase what has already been said,

or introduce a definition: in other words, to put it another way, that is to say, etc.

9. Markers that express a condition: if, even if, unless, etc.

These are only a few of the semantic markers which show us the logic relationship between sentences. Learners should be reminded to pay attention to this kind of semantic markers in their listening class and their listening practice outside the classroom. They are very useful in the while listening stage to train the learners' natural predicting skill.

Conclusion

Prediction is listener's spontaneous and automatic psychological activity. It is an extremely important strategy to use when listening. For some reasons the second language learners are reluctant to do this . And they pay so much attention to the new words and sentences and try to listen word by word that they neglect the role of prediction in listening, therefore they can not process the incoming information quickly and accurately. We need to remind them that guessing is a good thing in foreign language listening. It is actually their listening ability in their native language. An atmosphere should be created for the students to

feel comfortable guessing. They will not be ridiculed even if their guesses are wrong. They should also be trained what to do about it when guessing does not work. In this way their prior knowledge can be activated, and active thinking can be initiated. The unconsciously listening skills in the native language can be transferred consciously to the foreign language they are learning.

Prediction training can only be done with advanced learners who have a relatively good command of the target language. I do not explicitly teach predicting skills to the freshmen students although I may do implicitly. In the instruction, predicting skill should be integrated with other skills based on passages of discourse. The practice can be given casually and frequently so that the students are constantly remanded of the need to think forward and encouraged to make a habit of it.

The above-mentioned is just the pre-communication language training. There will, of course, be odd occasions in real life on which listeners have little or no expectations of what will be said, and due to the lack of relevant knowledge of the topic, the situation and the speakers, it is hard for the listeners to predict. However, it is helpful to focus at first on providing considerable training so that the learners can achieve a higher level of proficiency and success, and thus become confident when they come across difficult situations.

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Abstract:

Predicting in listening is a very important listening skill, and also a very important listening habit. However, the English learners are often hesitant to use this skill. Therefore, we tcachers should try to cultivate their predicting ability so that they can form a natural and effective listening habit. Students should be able to predict based on the topic, topic sentence, key words, sentence development, grammatical relations and logical development.

Key words:

listening comprehension, prediction, key words, topic sentence

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